Teaching Shakespeare through other Media

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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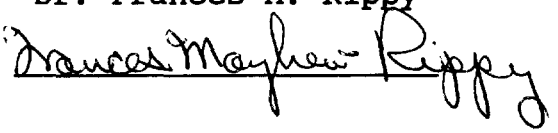

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Mendelssohn's Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream

> Innumerable as are the overtures and incidental numbers called to birth by Shakespeare, there is only one where play and music form an indivisible unity in our minds. With A Midsummer Night's Dream we cannot think of Shakespeare without Mendelssohn or Mendelssohn without Shakespeare.
>
> W. G. Whittaker

Shakespeare was brought into the world of German Romanticism with the publication of his first sixteen plays in their definitive German translation by Ludwig Tieck and A. W. Schlegel. Embracing the playwright as a fellow-Romantic, they hailed A Midsummer Night's Dream as a masterpiece akin to their own age. Said Tieck in his Notes on the play, "Whoever has been denied . . . the feeling of this poem's originality, the enchantment caused by the magic of its language and by the lovely kaleidoscope of changing pictures . . . such a man will not profit either by explanations, critics, or whatever might be done. . . ."

Such whole-hearted approbation was not unfounded, for to the Romantic, Shakespeare was walking on common ground. The magical atmosphere--the fantastic and unparalleled imaginary quality that requires an extraordinary suspension of disbelief--and the thematic content of A Midsummer Night's Dream were all of a kindred spirit to the German Romantic. In these aspects the work seems more a product of that Age and its sensibilities than Shakespeare's own.

It was in this context that a young Felix Mendelssohn encountered the playwright's works, which were performed and read in the family home. Striking a particular chord was the work that

had engendered such appreciation in Tieck. "I have grown accustomed to composing in our garden . . ." wrote a seventeen-year-old Mendelssohn, "Today or tomorrow I am going to dream there the A Midsummer Night's Dream" (Werner 87).

That the genesis of the Overture would be "dreamed" in a garden says a great deal about both the music and the play from which it was derived. Noticeable throughout A Midsummer Night's Dream is the synthesis of harmony--organic, musical and political--like that:

> Created both one flower,
> Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,
> Both warbling of one song, both in one key,
> . . . Like to a double Cherry, seeming parted.
> But yet an union in partition,
> Two lovely berries moulded on one stem;
> . . . With two seeming bodies, but one heart,
> Two of the first [like] coats of heraldry,
> Due but to one, and crowned with one crest"
>
> (III.ii.204-14)

This same harmony Mendelssohn incorporates in the Overture through the interweaving of different thematic material based on the different character groupings in the play--groupings mirrored by the different verse forms the members of each use. The lovers--Helena, Hermia, Demetrius and Lysander--speak in rhymed couplets; the royalties--Oberon and Titania, Theseus and Hippolyta--in blank verse; the fairies--Puck, Peaceblossom, Cobweb, Mustard and others--

in trochaic tetrameter; and the clowns in prose (and ballad in the play within the play). This differentiation, the particularly evident melopoeia, the constant reference to music and celebration in song and dance, make A Midsummer Night's Dream the most musical of Shakespeare's plays. Mendelssohn would seize upon this musicality and the play's magical quality in writing his Overture.

The setting of A Midsummer Night's Dream is infused with a certain remoteness. It takes place in a neutral territory

> Where the wild thyme blows,
> Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows,
> Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine . . .
>
> (II.i.249-51)

--somewhere between the real world and fairy-land--where the Actual and the Ethereal meet and each imbues itself with the nature of the other. This middle ground in the play is the vernal wood, where Puck and a host of sprites encounter the young lovers and the troupe of actors.

The exposition of Mendelssohn's Overture--organized around two interconnected sets of thematic groups-- reflects this division and interplay of opposite worlds. With its sweeping strings and scherzo style the first theme in the tonic group:

represents the ethereal kingdom of the fairies, presided over by

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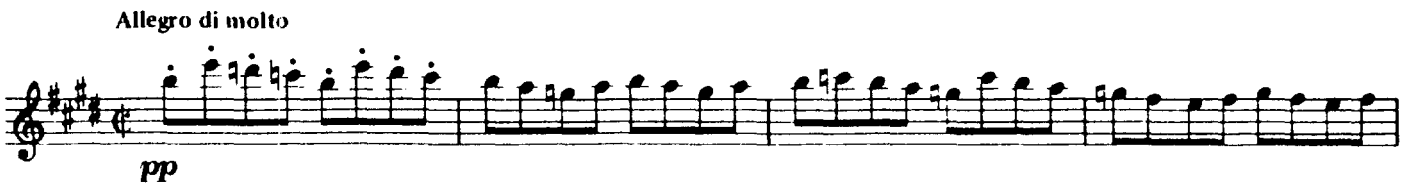
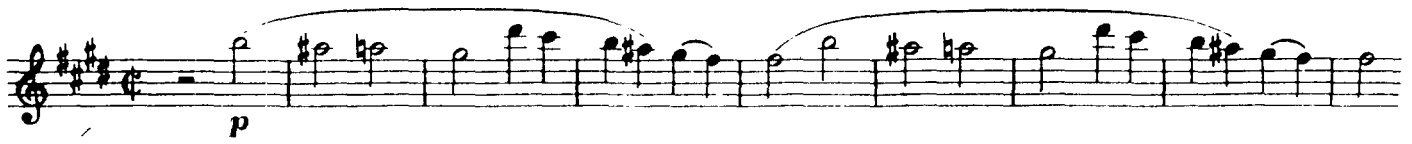


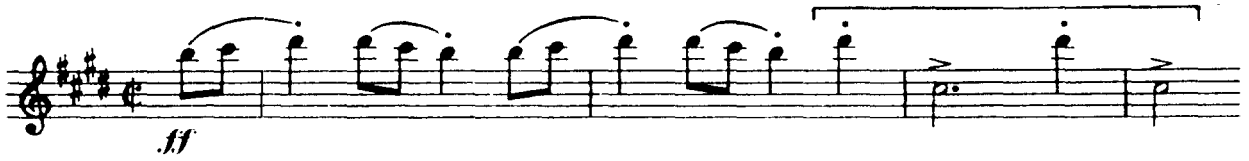
represents the ethereal kingdom of the fairies, presided over by

Oberon and Titania, whose characters are invoked by the regal quality of the four woodwind chords that begin the work--the leading motif which serves as an idée fixe in the Overture.

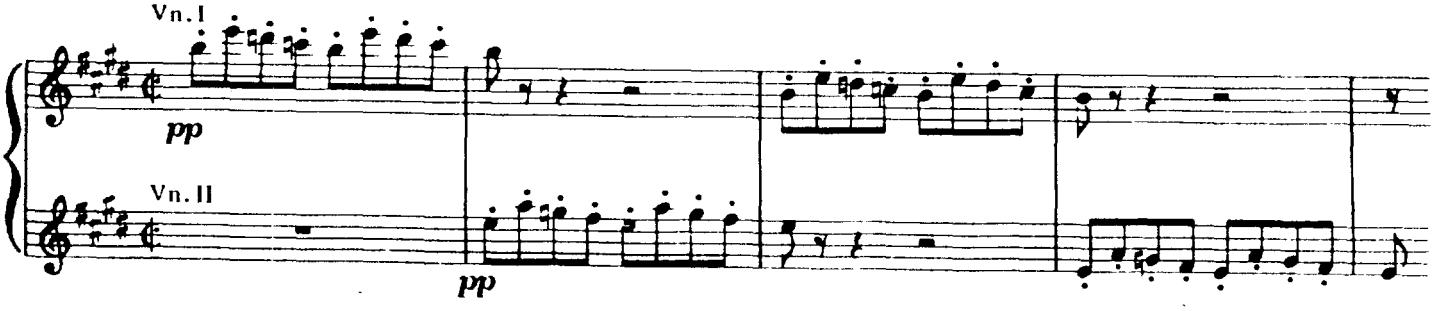
Exuberantly scored for full orchestra, the second theme of the tonic group corresponds to the more substantial world of Theseus's court in its pomp and revelry. This division, central to the action of the play, also dictates the structure of the second thematic group in the dominant, where Mendelssohn introduces the third and fourth character groupings in the Lovers theme:



and the Bottom/Clown theme:



THe central theme of A Midsummer Night's Dream is the mutability of love; variability likewise serves as "the essential dynamic element of [Mendelssohn's work]" (Grove's 145). The individual themes of the four character groupings are changed with each new presentation in the development:



The order of their presentation is in turn linked to the thematic organization of their appearances in the play.

Mendelssohn thus redirects our attentions from the fairy world to that of the Athenian court with the coming of daylight in the fourth act. The Theseus music in the recapitulation parallels his smug "'tis almost fairy time" (V.i.364). Indeed it is, for the play doesn't end in the ordered world of daylight but at midnight in the world of Puck, "that merry wanderer of the night" (II.i.43).

The final chord of the Theseus theme--symbolizing reason and order--is played, yet a whir of fairy music rushes across the orchestra. The tympani rumbles in the dominant unbalancing the atmosphere as the music wafts away into ethereality--into an airy nothing.

The programmatic nature of Mendelssohn's Overture gives to each word a warbling note. In it there are the different kingdoms and characters of Shakespeare's play. Identifying the various groups with their corresponding themes suggests the inextricability of the music and the source from which it derived. To students, this offers an opportunity to investigate melopoeia and its translation into music within a romantic context. It provides a musical avenue to the investigation of Shakespeare's genius.

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Shakespeare as Film Noire: **Roman Polanski's Macbeth**

> When one reads or sees Macbeth one cannot help but feeling that one is experiencing a re-creation or re-presentation of what a man is, in the present, even in the timeless.
>
> Sylvan Barnet

Perhaps more than any other of Shakespeare's plays, Macbeth tends to lose its power to familiarity. It is potentially the most puissant of his tragedies, yet the keenness of the playwright's words and sensibilities is often dulled by expectancy as familiarity with the text and its traditional production leads to a sort of telegraphing of the play's punch. We've all heard a hundred times Macbeth's despairing complaint about life, that it is "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" (V.v.26-27), yet the tragic weight of the lines (and indeed the drama) is lost when it becomes cliché.

What Roman Polanski's film does is to give fresh life to Macbeth. Polanski takes Shakespeare's tragedy and amplifies its visual scale, omitting much of the verbal poetry, substituting instead a visual poetry of violence. Polanski's Macbeth is not a filmed stage production but a motion picture in the usual sense. The added dimension provides a strikingly fertile medium for Shakespeare's text. By supplanting many of the dramatic conventions with modern film techniques that increase the kinetic energy of the drama, Polanski is able to overcome some of the limitations of Shakespeare's art form while introducing the advantages of his own.

Polanski's film is interpretive. It is through his eyes that we see Macbeth. His personal experiences, including his childhood experiences in Nazi-occupied Poland and the murder of his wife, the actress Sharon Tate, by the satanic group led by Charles Manson, were influential in coloring his perception of the play. Within the catalogue of Polanski's works Macbeth is no more a consciously created work than his previous films, and no more spectacular stylistically, but there is a deeper involvement in his subject matter, a new respect for his material. The sly theatricality has given way to vivid realism. There is blood and violence--as there always is in Polanski--but when blood spills in this film, it is at body temperature, fresh from living, suffering people.

What Polanski essentially gives us is the anatomy of an atrocity--the means by which a man comes to murder his king, his kinsman and a host of other innocents, forfeiting in the end his very soul. Polanski shows us in detail the unraveling of the moral fabric, how the descent into barbarism is a journey of steps. It is by obvious stages that we see the transformations in Macbeth's character as it is by those same stages that we see the changes in his wife.

The film is irredeemably grim, as is the play itself. But Polanski has furthered the seeming omnipotence of evil by creative use of music, setting and lighting; by giving us a workaday Macduff bent on revenge, not the restoration of order and the redemption of Scotland; by introducing Ross as a Machiavellian; by giving his film a fatal circuitousness through careful pairings in detail that

reemphasize the already evident tragic pattern of Macbeth and underscore a number of foils between characters that usually go unnoticed.

It is these aspects that are of primary importance in using the film as a teaching device, for although Polanski exercises a good degree of license, he is, in the main, faithful to the text in terms of theme, mood and tone, all of which are extremely palpable in his Macbeth. Therefore it is mutually important to ask both what it is the camera allows Polanski to do with the text, and what it is the text allows him to do with the camera.

The film's opening scenes exhibit this vivid realism. The first scene of the witches on the long, empty beaches near Portmeirion, Wales, places the drama immediately in a realistic setting. The "hurly-burly" atmosphere is early established as the witches evanesce into a fog, which in turn serves as the backdrop for the opening credits which play to the violent sounds of battle. The end of the credits and the passing of the fog reveals a battle-strewn landscape punctuated by the gory image of a soldier beating a wounded enemy with a mace. The violence is graphic, but it is difficult to candy-coat Shakespeare, and Macbeth in particular.

Polanski chooses to show Duncan at the battlefront receiving the news of Macbeth's valor as he also shows us the disloyal Thane of Cawdor being taken in arms. Though neither incident appears in the text--where Duncan is situated at a camp some distance from the actual fighting, and the original Thane is only referred to--they are effective in setting the tone of Polanski's movie. It is a

violent and treacherous world that these characters inhabit. By having Duncan ride with his procession to the march, the urgency of the conflict and expediency of justice is underscored. Duncan, who is often cast as a doddering and naive monarch, emerges in the film as vital and capable. And to the traitor Polanski gives a face.

From the Thane of Cawdor Duncan takes a medallion--a visual symbol of his position--and from this scene of the defeated traitor now stripped of his power, Polanski breaks to a closeup of Macbeth and his prophetic echoing of the witches' incantations. The effect is this: that while the traitorous Thane of Cawdor is a latent foil in the text, suggested in the lines "Go pronounce his present death / And with his former title greet Macbeth" (I.i.64-65), Polanski underscores the foil by this film break and by later having Macbeth take his leave of Duncan with the executed Thane hanging in the background as he utters his resolve about Malcolm being "a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap" (I.iv.49-50). This fatal circuitousness exists in the text. Polanski distills it in such pairings of detail.

A more explicit foil is also made of Banquo. Two men hear the prophecy of the Weird Sisters; each reacts differently in the text. Macbeth stands "rapt withal," his silence broken only by an ardent desire to know more. Banquo responds with initial curiosity that gives way to caution. Shakespeare's treatment of Banquo, it is useful to point out, derived largely from the fact that his patron, James I, drew his lineage from him. Prudence was therefore a practical trait for Shakespeare to instill in Banquo.

Yet Polanski recognizes that the presage addresses both men, and in the case of both the seeds of the ambiguous prophecy are sown on fertile soil. In a spurious coronation scene Polanski juxtaposes Banquo's lines about posterity from the third act with the images of Macbeth performing the liturgy. In this Polanski suggests that Banquo's own considerations are stirred by witnessing Macbeth's ascendancy. As the prophecy regarding Macbeth comes to pass, so should that pertaining to him. That Banquo takes no steps to secure the fulfillment of this prophecy means that he is ultimately prudent and moral, yet he is human enough to be tempted. It is this humanity that Polanski underscores.

In the most damning foil, Polanski pairs Macbeth and Donalbain. By giving Donalbain a limp, Polanski suggests an already faulty character. Likewise the interplay of facial shots at the table after the investiture of his brother reveals a suspicious Malcolm, a disappointed Macbeth, and a jealous Donalbain. The most powerful incident, however, is a spurious scene in which Donalbain seeks after the witches at the film's conclusion, suggesting that the killing of Macbeth and the restoration of order is but the momentary pinnacle of the cycle of state affairs. Here it is useful to discuss with students Elizabethan cosmology and political ideology--the world view incorporated in Shakespeare's works.

Polanski makes extensive use of the light/dark imagery of Macbeth. He uses lighting to indicate the moral condition of his characters. When Macbeth receives news of his entitlement, he

physically withdraws himself from the presence of the others. Inside a tent, by firelight, Macbeth suffers his great temptation, and Polanski shows the conflicting forces at work in his psyche with a chiaroscuro face shot where half of Macbeth remains obscured by shadow. The same effect Polanski uses at the banquet scene, and in a scene which doesn't appear in the text--the actual murder of Duncan.

The climactic murder of Duncan is not an act of passion or revenge; it is one of calculated premeditation. There is no attempt at justifying the deed--it is plain and simple murder. Its very starkness is unsettling. Yet Macbeth is not a simple monster predisposed towards murder. Polanski cast a young Jon Finch in the role, which seems to establish this initial innocence better than, say, a seasoned Orson Welles does. The desires that tempt this young man, while inordinate, are fully human, as is his hesitation at committing the deed. Shakespeare captures in the powerful language of the first soliloquy the reservations of the would-be usurper, and the struggling of Macbeth's soul that shrinks in the knowledge that

> in these matters
> We still have judgment here, that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
> To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice
> Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice
> To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
> First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then as his host,
Who should against his murtherer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. (I.vii.7-16)

The manifestations of his doubt and guilt are easily shaped by the power of his imagination to produce the daggers that marshall him in the way he is going. Polanski chooses to show us the daggers so that as Macbeth struggles with the image, we feel with him for a moment the heat-oppressed brain and the madness of the deed at hand before he is able to rationalize away the daggers as visions brought about by the bloody business. Macbeth gives an apostrophe to Night, gathers himself, and so exits, with a shot of Lady Macbeth in the background, for Duncan's chamber with poetic resolution.

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not Duncan, for it is a knell,
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. (II.i.62-64)

Polanski has worked up the tension to a feverous pitch. The rich and dark coloring of the castle with its flickering tapers and shadows that seem to lie in wait for its inhabitants makes vivid the light/dark imagery of the text. It makes the kinetic energy of the moment palpable. We see the hesitancy and strain in the veins and sweat on Macbeth's forehead juxtaposed with a peacefully sleeping Duncan. Duncan awakes and Macbeth brutally murders him. Polanski ends the scene with a close-up of the crown hitting the floor.

Macbeth emerges after the murder having indeed seen the Gorgon. There is no grand language, only the monosyllabic "I have done the deed" (II.ii.14). The Macbeth who had minutes earlier been so resolute, returns with the daggers in hand, refusing to look again upon his victim. The grim pathos of the situation is heightened by Polanski's stark use of color--a vivid blood red against a black and white background--and the half-heartedness of Lady Macbeth's reassurances.

Both are struck by the horror of the committed deed that has rendered Macbeth unable to utter "Amen." And that horror is so well realized that Macbeth laments that "To know my deed, 'twere best not to know myself" (II.ii.70). We pity the murderer who is so filled with terror, not at the threat of discovery, but at the horror of the deed itself. And we realize that he and his wife have taken their first and irrevocable step towards damnation.

It is with this theme of damnation that Polanski seems to be primarily concerned. The film is murky and dark--devoid of any redemption. The text, it must be remembered, is largely so also, for even the end of the play, which sees Macbeth defeated and right order restored, is not didactic--there is no divestiture of grand morals, or valiant triumph, and we leave not with a sense of victory and splendor, but with the stark image of the usurper's head on a pike.

Macbeth is, above all, a disturbing play, and in this aspect Polanski's adaptation is most appropriate. His Macbeth is film noire. As such it is an engaging work attuned to the sensibilities

of most student audiences. With a view towards Shakespeare's genius, the film is able to engender in its audience the sense of outrage and horror--moral, intellectual, and above all visceral--that the play was designed to evoke in Elizabethan audiences. That the film can duplicate that most fundamental of responses makes it a useful teaching tool.

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Shakespeare in the Opera: Verdi's Otello

> . . . instead of Otello being an Italian opera written in the style of Shakespear, Othello is a play written in the style of Italian opera. It is quite peculiar among his works in this aspect. Its characters are monsters: Desdemona is a prima donna, with handkerchief, confidant, and vocal solo all complete; and Iago, though certainly more anthropomorphic than the Count di Luna, is only so when he slips out of his stage villain's part. Othello's transports are conveyed by a magnificent but senseless music which rages from the Propontick to the Hellespont in an orgy of thundering sound and bounding rhythm; and the plot is a pure farce plot; that is to say, it is supported on an artificially manufactured and desperately precarious trick with a handkerchief which a chance word might upset at any moment. With such a libretto, Verdi was quite at home: his success with it proves, not that he could occupy Shakespear's plane, but that Shakespear could on occasions occupy his, which is a very different matter.
>
> Bernard Shaw Shaw on Shakespeare

Giuseppe Verdi's Otello is less an adaptation of one work to another art form than the amalgamation of the special quality of opera--its emotive power and expressive nature--and one of the most dynamic plays in all of literature. The opera seizes upon Othello's fine emphasis upon a single theme and the vehemence of emotion found in its major characters--the noble, just and passionate Moor; the pure, naive Desdemona; and the malevolent, scheming Iago--working out that theme and those passions to their fitful conclusion in a media that in many ways seems more natural and fitting than the original.

The context of Verdi's work is largely responsible for the sense of appropriateness found in the operatic media. Composed during the late nineteenth-century--a time when Italian enthusiasm for Shakespeare was at a peak--Otello is alive with a sense of the

romantic--a sense that places its stock in the power and efficacy of emotion in determining human actions. From Shakespeare's text this sense was easily distilled and transferred to a medium where its fruition is brought about in song and music.

Said A. W. Schlegel in his Notes, "the dramatic and especially the tragic art of the ancients annihilates in some measure the external circumstances of space and time; while, by their changes, the romantic drama adorns its more varied pictures" (324). It is the adornment of these "varied pictures" that distinguishes Otello from its counterpart in Shakespeare. From the opera Otello emerges a simplified character based largely on the writing of Schlegel, among others. The plot of Verdi's work varies from Shakespeare's--at times giving emphasis where in Shakespeare there is little, at other times glancing over what in Shakespeare draws much attention. Yet to address the opera solely in terms of the original play is to miss the opera's originality; it is to deny the work's viability.

The following synopsis of the Otello, drawn in part from the Cambridge opera handbook, while lengthy, is helpful both in establishing or re-establishing a familiarity with the opera and in surveying these various refinements. Comments on the orchestration are designed to suggest that the musical and lyrical content of the work are inextricably wrapped together. Difficulties with the language that might be encountered are easily mitigated by the provision of both the original Italian and English translations of key passages.

Act One

The opera begins amidst a violent storm in Cyprus. The sounds of the tempest--the high woodwind lightning and horn thunder--are echoed in the chorus: "Lampi! tuoni! Gorghi!" ("Lightning! thunder! whirlpool!") A trumpet and cannon-shot announce that Otello's galley is in sight as Montano, the former governor of Cyprus, shouts "E l'alato Leon!" He sees the "winged lion." Fearing for the safety of Otello, the group prays for God's protection: "Dio, fulgor della bufera!" ("God, you the splendor amidst the storm!")

Learning that Otello's ship is damaged, the group moves towards the sea while Iago--Otello's jealous and spiteful ensign--grabbing the hand of Roderigo, moves ahead of the troupe, exclaiming in an aside: "L'alvo / Frenetico del mar sia la sua tomba!" (May the frenetic ocean-bed be his tomb!) To his chagrin the crowd shouts "E salvo!" ("He's safe!") A group moves off-stage to help land the galley. Otello enters, proclaiming a divine victory:

> Esultate! L' orgoglio musulmano
> Sepolto e in mar, nostra e del ciel e gloria!
> Dopo l'armi lo vinse l'uragano.
>
> Exult! Moslem pride
> Is buried in the sea. The glory is ours and heaven's!
> After arms conquered them, so did the storm.

Otello's train--Cassio, Montano and others--enter the castle as Iago and Roderigo mix with the crowd, who sings a victory chorus--the tableau that marks the conclusion of the opening storm scene.

Roderigo tells Iago of his love for Otello's wife, Desdemona. Iago in turn counsels Roderigo not to worry, for Desdemona will surely tire of the "thick-lipped savage." In addition, Iago hints that he has a plan. In a recitative he reveals his hatred for Otello and Cassio, "quell'azzimato capitano" ("the fancy-dressed captain"), who has been given the rank Iago feels he deserved for his performance in battle. While Iago continues his bitter condemnation of Otello to Roderigo, the crowd lights the bonfire and breaks into the second choral tableau: "Fuoco di gioia!" ("Fire of joy!")

After the fire and singing dies down, Iago calls to Roderigo "Roderigo, beviam!" (Roderigo, let's drink!) Iago asks Cassio to join them, which he at first refuses. But when Iago asks Cassio to join them in a toast to the marriage of Otello and Desdemona, he accepts. He has placed himself within reach of the scheming Iago who knows that "S'ei s'inebria e perduto!" ("if he's drunk, he's lost!")

Wine is brought and the group begins to sing the Brindisi, the Drinking Song--"Inaffia l'ugola" ("Wet your whistles"). As Roderigo and Cassio sing, Iago's words are a malicious undercurrent: "Chi all'esca ha morso / Del ditirambo / Spavaldo e strambo / Beva con me" ("Whoever has bitten at the bait of the arrogant and extravagant dithyramb, let him drink with me"). Between stanzas Iago refills Cassio's glass--"Un altro sorso / E brillo egli e" ("Another sip and he'll be tipsy"). Cassio, now drunk, stumbles through the third stanza, provoking the laughter

of the chorus. Iago urges Roderigo to pick a fight with the staggering Cassio.

Montano comes on stage shocked by Cassio's drunkenness. "Ogni notte in tal guisa / Cassio preludia al sonno" ("Cassio precedes his sleep like this every night"), lies Iago. Roderigo insults Cassio, whose temper flares. As the music builds up the tension and the townsfolk clear the tables and chairs from the area, Montano tries to quiet Cassio, but Cassio turns on him, drawing his sword. Montano draws his and a duel ensues.

While Cassio and Montano fight, Iago tells Roderigo to wake up the town with cries of a riot. Otello is awakened and enters the stage from the castle door, crying "Abasso le spade!" ("Down with your swords!") Otello demands an explanation to which Iago offers only "Non so" ("I don't know"). Learning that Montano has been twice wounded, Otello flies into a rage, exclaiming "Cassio, Non sei piu capitano" (Cassio, You are no longer a captain"). Cassio lays down his sword, which Iago in turn picks up and hands to a soldier. Iago, in an aside, sings gleefully "Oh! mio trionfo!" (O my triumph!"). He has successfully worked the first part of his revenge.

The next scene finds Otello and Desdemona alone after the others have been dismissed. A muted cello smoothes the atmosphere. Otello embraces Desdemona--a number of muted cellos join in a soft passage--as he sings of his immense love for her. "Te ne rammenti!" ("Do you remember!"), she replies as a harp begins to play. The cellos remove their mutes and begin the principal

movement of the Love Duet as Desdemona recounts how she became enamored with Otello:

Quando narravi l'esule tua vita
E ifieri eventi e i lunght tuoi dolor,
Ed io t'udia coll'anima rapita
In quei spaventi e coll'estasi in cor.

When you told of your exiled life,
And its proud events and your long sorrows,
And I listened to you, my soul stolen away
In those fears, and with ecstasy in my heart.

Otello responds "E tu m'amavi per le mie sventure / Ed io t'amavo per la tua pieta" ("And you loved me for my adventures / and I loved you for your pity"). Desdemona echoes the sentiment and concludes the section with a brief coda.

Overcome with emotion, Otello wishes for death at this moment of sublime happiness: "Venga la morte!" ("Come death!"). His love at a feverous pitch, Otello sits down, crying to Desdemona for "Un bacio . . . un bacio . . . ancora un bacio" ("A kiss . . . a kiss . . . Another kiss"). He rises, the two embrace to harp arpeggios. The couple moves towards the castle door as cellos softly close the first act.

Act Two

The second act opens with rumblings in the bassoons and lower strings that suggest the base designs of Iago. Inside Otello's castle, Iago is posing as friend to Cassio, consoling him after his

demotion. Assuring him that he will soon be in the arms of his mistress, Iago suggests that Cassio ask Desdemona, "il Duce / Del nostro Duce" ("our general's general"), to intercede with Otello on his behalf. Iago remarks that she will momentarily be in the garden. Cassio thus withdraws through the window to wait on Desdemona.

After Cassio leaves Iago's presence, the strings--sharp and dissonant--mark the beginning of Iago's Aria Credo soliloquy. Delivered in terse epigrams, the soliloquy begins "Credo in un Dio crudel che m'ha creato / Simile a se, e che nell'ira io nomo" (I believe in a cruel God who created me / Similar to himself, and whom I worship in wrath"). Defamations of one kind after another follow until Iago concludes with the nihilistic "Vien dopo tanta irrisïon la Morte / E Poi? - La Morte è il Nulla. / E Vecchia fola il Ciel" (After such mockery comes Death / And then? Death is Nothingness. / Heaven is an ancient fable").

Iago looks out the window and sees Desdemona entering the garden with Emilia, his own wife. Calling out to Cassio, Iago directs him to go meet Desdemona, which he does. "Or qui si tragga Otello!" ("Now let Otello be drawn here!"), wishes Iago. As the group in the garden withdraws from sight, Iago's wish comes true as Otello enters. Placing his back to Otello, Iago sighs within earshot "Cio m'accora" ("That grieves me"), to gain the Moor's attention. A conversational duet follows in which Otello tries to solicit information while Iago insinuates that something has been going on involving Cassio and Desdemona in the garden.

Iago manipulates Otello by skillfully pretending to hold back information. Otello, his curiosity piqued, eventually explodes "Dunque senza velami / T'esprimi e sanza ambagi" ("Tell me then, directly, without veilings or evasions"). Iago fatefully replies "Temete, signor, la gelosia!" ("Beware, my lord, of jealousy!") Further telling of the "idra fosca"--the "dark hydra" of jealousy that poisons with its sting--Iago elicits from Otello a shrill "Miseria mia!!" ("My misery!!") At this moment choral praise of Desdemona is heard off-stage. Verdi has juxtaposed the pure naivete of Desdemona--praised by the chorus--and the powerful chords of jealousy in her husband. She enters and Iago instructs Otello to be vigilant in looking for proof of her infidelity.

Children, seamen and women pay homage to Desdemona with gifts as the chorus--another tableau richly colored with mandolins, guitars and a bagpipe--sings her praise. Iago and Otello witness the scene through the window. The ensign tries to evoke suspicion in Otello, but the latter gestures that he cannot believe her untrue. Iago removes himself in an low-pitched aside, vowing to destroy this happiness and trust.

Desdemona sees Otello and enters the castle, beginning to intercede on behalf of Cassio. She twice asks for his pardon but Otello, now suspicious, refuses. Complaining that his head is burning, Otello is offered a handkerchief by Desdemona, but he refuses it, throwing to the ground. Emilia picks it up, and Desdemona, fearing that she has offended Otello, pleads for her own pardon.

While Desdemona sings, "Dammi la dolce e lieta / Parola del perdono" ("Give me the sweet and happy / Word of pardon"), Otello laments the loss of Desdemona's love. Noticing that his wife has the handkerchief in hand, Iago presses Emilia to let him have it. He succeeds in taking it from her, then reveals to the audience his intention to plant the handkerchief as false evidence in Cassio's home.

Iago, in response to seeing Otello's suffering, gloats, "Il lio velen lavora" ("My poison is working"). Looking up at the ensign, Otello angrily tries to dismiss him, but Iago only withdraws to savor the sight of the Moor in anguish--the intensity of which is reflected in the rapidly ascending orchestral sequences which suggest swelling suspicion and anger. "Ora e per sempre addio sante memorie" ("Farewell now and forever, holy memories"), bids Otello to his happiness. Iago tries to quell the raging Moor but is instead thrown to the ground by him--the violence of which act is underscored by descending brass in the orchestra.

Iago cries out for divine protection, and, getting up, threatens to resign from Otello's service. The latter, suddenly calmed, replies, "No . . . rimani. / Forse onesto tu sei" ("No . . . stay here. Perhaps you are honest"). Otello presses Iago for proof, the latter responding, "Avvinti / Vederli forse?" ("Would you see them coupled?") Iago then begins his racconto--his fabricated account of Cassio's sleep-talk: "Desdemona soave! Il nostro amor s'asconda. / Cauti vegliamo!" ("Sweet Desdemona! Let our love be hidden. / Let's be very careful!") Further pressing

his charge, Iago tells Otello that he has seen Desdemona's handkerchief in Cassio's possession.

Otello explodes: "Ah! mille vite gli donasse Iddio! / Una à povera preda al furor mio!" ("Ah! that God would give him a thousand lives! One is but poor prey for my fury!") His resolve hardened, Otello, on his knees, utters a solemn cabaletta oath. Iago then kneels beside him, swearing to do whatever necessary to rectify the situation. The two rise together, with their right arms extended towards heaven, repeating their oaths. Otello's fate is sealed. The orchestra plays fortissimo as the curtain falls.

Act Three

The prelude to the third act returns to the "idra fosca" melody of act two. It originates in the low strings, then moves abruptly to the upper register--suggesting the invasion of the upper state by the lower, with all that connotes--building in crescendo to a powerful tutti statement like that that marked the play's violent beginning. Curtain-rise reveals a herald announcing the arrival of a group of Venetian ambassadors. Otello dismisses the messenger, turning to Iago, who says he will bring Cassio to the castle so that Otello can witness firsthand the signs of his adulterous behavior. Desdemona approaches and Iago withdraws, reminding Otello to watch her for the same signs.

Desdemona enters the hall with gracefully descending strings suggesting her pure naivete to the designs of Iago and the heightened suspicions of her husband. She greets her husband, "Dio ti giocondi, o sposo dell'alma mia sovrano" ("May God gladden you,

husband, ruler of my soul"). Otello responds by taking her hand, suggesting that in it lies some "dèmone gentil" ("gentle demon"). Ignoring this, Desdemona again begins to intercede on behalf of the dismissed captain. Otello starts; the music is agitated.

Desdemona responds to his sudden "illness" and offers him her handkerchief. Seizing her hand, Otello demands the handkerchief which he had given her--the handkerchief which Iago has now planted in Cassio's abode. To lose this handkerchief--this charmed talisman--would be a great woe, to give it away, a great misfortune. "Mi fai paura!" ("You frighten me!"), cries Desdemona, who falsely denies that she has lost the handkerchief.

Thinking his ravings to be a joke designed to distract her from pleading Cassio's case, Desdemona sings to Otello, whose fury is, in turn, only magnified. Realizing that Otello is serious, Desdemona is terrified. Otello grabs her by the chin and forces her to swear to her fidelity. Shaken, she moves from him to a column for support. "In te parla una Furia" ("A Fury is speaking in you"), she cries, pleading for mercy. Otello responds that he sees Hell in her face. Again the music is abruptly violent. Otello begins to weep also, whereupon Desdemona replies, "E son io l'innocente cagion di tanto pianto!" ("And I am the innocent cause of such weeping!") Denying Otello's charge of adultery, Desdemona is repulsed by his cynical apology that he mistook her for "Quella vil cortigiana che è la sposa d' Otello" ("that vile strumpet who is Otello's wife"). As the orchestra plummets into despair, Desdemona takes leave of her husband.

Now alone, slumped in a chair, Otello despairingly begins "Dio! mi potevi scagliar tutti i mali" ("God! You could have hurled all the evils at me"), then rising to deliver lines that indicate the depth of his love for Desdemona:

> Ma, o pianto, o duol! m'han rapito il miraggio
> Dov'io, giulivo,--l'anima acqueto.
> Spento è quel sol, quel sorriso, quell raggio
> Che mi fa vivo,--Che fa lieto!
>
> But, o weeping, o sorrow! They have stolen my mirage
> Where I, happy, becalm my soul.
> That sun, that smile, that ray is extinguished
> Which gives me life, which gladdens me!

Again Otello's wrath overtakes him as he shouts for proof. At this Iago enters, exclaiming that Cassio is there. "Cielo! Oh gioia!!" ("Heaven! Oh, joy!!), replies Otello, who withdraws to the terrace to spy on Cassio.

The violent dissonance gives way to deep strings with Cassio's entrance. Iago greets him and Cassio in turn asks about Desdemona's intervention on his behalf. Having moved forward, concealing himself behind a pillar, Otello, on hearing this, remarks "Ei la nomò" ("He named her"). Iago instructs Cassio to be patient, then he urges him--as the music begins lustily--to tell him about the woman who loves him, whispering the name of Bianca so that it won't be heard by Otello. Cassio begins proudly to tell Iago of his conquest. Thinking him to be talking about Desdemona,

Otello laments, "L'empio trionfa, il suo scherno m'ucc ide; / Dio frena l'ansia che in core mi sta!" ("The wicked man triumphs; his scorn slays me; / God, restrain the anxiety in my heart!") Cassio quietly confides in Iago that someone besides Bianca must be in love with him. He produces the handkerchief which he assumes is the token of some secret admirer. Iago takes the handkerchief and waves it in sight of Otello, who expresses in horror "E quello! è quello!" ("That's it! That's it!") Otello laments his betrayal while Iago teases Cassio that the handkerchief is a web in which his heart will be caught.

Off-stage trumpets are heard announcing the arrival of the Venetian ambassadors. Cassio exits and Otello emerges from the shadows asking "Come la ucciderò?" ("How shall I kill her?") He requests a poison but Iago says he should instead murder Desdemona in her adulterous bed. Otello agrees and proceeds to promote Iago to Cassio's former position.

Iago departs to bring Desdemona back. Shortly thereafter the group of ambassadors enters the stage accompanied by Iago, his unwitting victim and a host of others. Lodovico proclaims official greeting from Venice and presents a parchment to Otello. While Otello reads the message, Lodovico greets Desdemona and asks why Cassio is not present. Iago explains that Otello is angry with him, Desdemona adding that she thinks he will be restored to grace soon. Angered at the mention of Cassio by his wife, Otello threatens to strike her when she continues to press his case. "Demonio taci!!" ("Silence, demon!!"), utters Otello, much to the

astonishment of Lodovico and the others. Otello demands that Cassio be brought forth. Upon his arrival, Otello reads the contents of the parchment, which states that Otello is to be called back to Venice and the rule of Cyprus is to be assumed by Cassio.

In a rage Otello throws Desdemona to the ground. The onlookers are shocked, both at her condition and the silence of Otello, who returns to his chair and idly stares at the floor.

Taking advantage of the situation, Iago moves to remind Otello of his earlier resolution to kill Desdemona, as he promises to take care of Cassio himself. Iago then approaches Roderigo, convincing him to slay Cassio that evening. Suddenly Otello rises from the chair, ordering everyone away. As everyone departs Desdemona makes a last appeal to Otello, who has only curses for her in return. The Moor's passions overcome him and he faints at the foot of his throne, leaving Iago to remark, "Chi può vietar che questa fronte io prema / Col mio tallone?" ("Who can stop me from pressing my heel on this forehead?") The crowd continues to praise Otello from a distance as the "Lion of Venice," and Iago victoriously declaims "Ecco il Leone!" ("Here is the Lion!"); the curtain falls.

Act Four

A wailing English horn marks the prelude to the fourth act. It suggests in its mournful tones the sadness of the events about to take place. The curtain rises, revealing Desdemona's tomblike bedchamber--the tightness of the set is a stark contrast to the open-air first act and the middle acts which take place in the garden and the great hall of the castle. Desdemona prepares for

bed, attended by Emilia. The estranged wife of Otello asks that her white wedding dress be laid on the bed, remarking that, should she die, she wishes to be buried with one of its veils.

Unpinning Desdemona's hair, Emilia recalls a sad "Willow Song" she learned from her mother's maid, Barbara--who had been abandoned by the man she loved. The song is that of a weeping, scorned lover. The haunting "O Salce! Salce! Salce!" ("O willow! willow! willow!)- "an expression of ineffable sadness," says the 1887 disposizione scenica or production book, punctuates the song, along with its refrain, "Cantiamo! il Salce funebre / Sarà la mia ghirlanda" ("Let's sing! the funereal willow shall be my garland"). Its summary lines apply to both Otello and Desdemona: "Egli era nato per la sua gloria, / Io per amarlo e per morir" ("He was born for his glory, I to love him and to die"). Emilia says good-night and turns to leave when Desdemona breaks down: "Ah! Emilia, Emilia, addio, Emilia, addio!" Desdemona, now alone, prays and falls asleep.

Muted double basses from the low register foreshadow Desdemona's end. Otello enters, scimitar in hand, from a secret door in the back of the room. Laying down the weapon, he closes the door and blows out the candle. Raising the bed-curtains, Otello bends over her, kissing her three times. The "Bacio" music from the first act is heard.

On the third kiss Desdemona awakens, "Chi è là? / Otello?" ("Who is there? Otello?") Her initial calm turns to terror as she realizes his intentions. Getting out of bed she asks the reason

behind his rage. "Ami Caio" ("You love Cassio"), replies Otello. Desdemona denies his allegations, asking for Cassio to be fetched in order that her story may be corroborated. Otello responds (erroneously), "Muto è per sempre . . . Morto" ("He is mute forever dead"). He then grabs Desdemona, throws her on the bed--the music in an agitated crescendo--strangling her with his bare hands, ignoring the knocking at the door, while the music "ebbs in diminuendo with her life" (Hepokoski 18). Stepping back from the body Otello utters, "Calma come la tomba" ("Calm as the tomb").

Otello responds to the knocking at the door and the sound of Emilia asking for entrance into the room. Letting her in, he learns that Cassio, still alive, has killed Roderigo. Emilia, hearing Desdemona's voice, rushes to the bed to hear her last words: "Nessuno . . . io stessa . . . al mio / Signor mi raccomanda . . . Muoio innocente . . . Addio" ("Nobody . . . I myself . . . Commend me to my Lord . . . I die innocent . . . Farewell"). Otello admits to Emilia that he has killed his wife after having learned from Iago of her infidelity with Cassio. Emilia, furious, runs from the room shouting for help. Cassio, Iago and Lodovico come into the room, discovering the body and the Moor who stands over it. Emilia presses Iago to deny the charge Otello has levied against him. Had he said that Desdemona had been unfaithful? Iago replies, "Tal la credea" ("I believed her to be such"). Otello mentions the handkerchief, and Emilia, realizing what has happened, explains that it was Iago who had taken it. Cassio confirms this.

Montano comes into the room, reporting that Roderigo has implicated Iago from his death-bed. Otello demands an answer from Iago, who refuses, then suddenly unleashes his sword and runs from the room pursued by the guards.

In his moment of epiphany Otello rushes for his scimitar, beginning his final soliliquoy: "Niun mi tema / S'anco armato mi vede" ("Let no one fear me /Even though you see me armed"). A solo oboe stills the scene. Otello drops the scimitar and begins his farewell:

> E tu . . . come sei pallida! e stanca, e muta, e bella,
> Pia creatura nata sotto maligna stella.
> Fredda come la casta tua vita, e in cielo assorta.
> Dedemona! Desdemona! . . . Ah! . . . morta! . . . morta!
> . . . morta!
>
> And you . . . how pale you are! and tired, and mute, and
> beautiful,
> A pious creature born under an evil star.
> Cold as your chaste life, and taken up into heaven.
> Desdemona! Desdemona! Ah! . . . Dead! . . . Dead! . . .
> Dead!

Otello then pulls out a hidden dagger and stabs himself, falling to the ground. He drags himself to the bed and kneels beside Desdemona. Trying three times to pull himself up to kiss her, he dies on the third attempt. His final words:

Pria d'ucciderti . . . spoa . . . ti baciaci.
Or morendo . . . nell'ombra . . . in cui mi giacio . .
Un bacio . . . un bacio ancora . . . un altro bacio . .

Before killing you . . . my wife . . . I kissed you.
Now, dying . . . in the shadow . . . in which I lie . .
A kiss . . . a kiss again . . . another kiss . . .

The events of Otello--except for the escape of Iago, and the elimination of the play's first scene--are the same as in Shakespeare, yet their intensity is heightened both by the operatic medium--in which passions swell to expression in song and music--and the selective emphasis employed in the libretto. As mentioned earlier, Otello's character is a simplification of his literary counterpart. Verdi depicts the Moor in two distinct modes--one of the violent savage, and the other of the assimilated soldier, with his learned behavior pattern. "One may see in Othello," writes Schlegel in his Notes,

> the savage nature of that burning zone, which produces the most ferocious animals and the most poisonous plants. The wish for glory, the foreign laws of honour, sweeter and nobler customs, have only apparently tamed him. In him jealousy is not that delicate irritability of the heart that is one with an enthusiastic respect for the loved one; but it is the sensual frenzy that brought into

> the heated climates the unworthy practice of shutting women indoors and many other unnatural abuses. One drop of this poison put into his blood gives rise to the most fearful effervescence. Othello shows himself to be noble, sincere, full of trust, fully aware of the love that he inspires; he is a hero who scorns danger, the worthy head of his soldiers, the solid supporter of the State. But the purely physical power of his passions demolishes his adopted virtues with one blow, and the savage supplants in him the civilized man. The same tyranny of the blood over the will is shown in the expression of his unrestrained desire to be revenged on Cassio. And after recovering from his deception--when remorse, tenderness, and the feeling of offended honour suddenly reawaken in his heart--he turns against himself, with all the fury of a despot who punishes his rebellious slave. He suffers doubly; he suffers in both of the spheres into which his existence is divided.
>
> (11-13)

The dichotomy of Otello's character and his descent into its lower portion is thus emphasized in the opera, which omits the grandiose speeches which develop the Moor's nobler side in the original play. He appears, therefore, much closer to his animal nature; his passions, having more easily collied his best judgment, assay to lead the way with less resistance. He suffers more from his own nature than from his virtues.

To students of Shakespeare this distinction is noteworthy. The emphasis in the opera placed on the essentially primal nature of the Moor and the subsequent reduction of the noble stature he maintains in the play provide a key to understanding his character. The result is a focus on a more singular and fully developed aspect of his character, offering a different view of the tragedy and its hero.

The operatic medium is likewise of concern to students. Verdi uses the musical score and manner in which the libretto is delivered--aria and recitative, and the range of melopoeia--to indicate atmosphere, action, and the moral condition of his characters. As the libretto is in Italian it is difficult to talk about inter-textuality in a primary sense; the words are different. Yet Verdi's work emerges as faithful to Shakespeare in a sense greater than the merely literal. It is with this aspect that teachers and students of Shakespeare will be primarily concerned.

Note

[1] All citations from Otello are drawn from Otello: dramma lirico in quattro atti.

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Conclusion

The integration of the various adaptations of Shakespeare's works into the classroom is easily accomplished. Beyond the technical considerations of a cross-media approach, the process is simply one of combining the text and the adaptation, with the view that the latter is an avenue of gaining an increased understanding and enjoyment of the former.

Thus from Mendelssohn's Overture students can gain an appreciation of melopoeia in A Midsummer Night's Dream, an increased understanding of the interplay of the play's various themes, and a general enjoyment of its musical and magical qualities that Mendelssohn has brought to fruition in a musical score.

Through Polanski's Macbeth students can gain a more thorough understanding of the play's central themes, its rise/fall structure and tragic nature--all of which are underscored by the adaptation in the film noire genre.

From Verdi's Otello students can draw a distillation of the play's emotive content--its singular theme and depth of emotion in its main characters--the expression of which is made more potent through the operatic medium.

The particular viability of these various elements--of theme, poetry, plot and structure--in each respective medium, is of decided importance to the cross-media approach. The primary issue in using that approach as a secondary teaching device, however,

isn't the technical assessment of how that viability is achieved; rather it is establishing the viability of Shakespeare for scholastic audiences. It is not enough that he is part of the literary canon. Literature is not science or mathematics. To have meaning it must say something to students. That a cross-media approach incorporates a number of voices directed at a variety of senses and sensibilities, makes it useful in increasing the chances that something is being heard.